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DEPT FOR A/S FRIED AND EUR/CARC

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM RU GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: A/S FRIED MEETS OPPOSITION, BOTH INSIDE
AND OUT OF PARLIAMENT

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES KENT LOGSDON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Begin Summary: On October 20, Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried and Ambassador Tefft met with Georgian opposition parliamentarians. The MPs told Fried they were working to help the country through its post-invasion recovery and were pursuing democratic reforms. The group spoke about the Anti-Crisis Commission (ACC), and its progress to date on democratic and social reforms. The Parliamentary Commission to investigate the August events, headed by an opposition MP, was focused on whether Georgia could have avoided military action. Fried encouraged the commission and opposition to ask hard questions. In a separate meeting, Fried and the Ambassador met with civil society representatives and the opposition outside Parliament. The group believed that the country was divided, and some argued that Saakashvili had too much power. They claimed Georgian democracy hung the balance, and urged conditionality for foreign aid to Georgia. Fried told both groups that a military solution to Russian occupation did not exist and urged their support for a peaceful way forward.
End Summary.

PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION FOCUSED ON THE TOUGH QUESTIONS AND PARTY BUILDING

¶2. (C) On October 20, Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried and Ambassador Tefft met with Georgian opposition parliamentarians, including Christian Democratic Movement (CDM) Chairman Giorgi Targamadze, Vice Speaker Levan Vepkhvadze, Gia Tortladze, and Paata Davitaia. The MPs told Fried they were pursuing democratic reforms in Georgia via constitutional methods and believed they were making progress developing an opposition with real political authority.

¶3. (C) Targamadze said his party was promoting peace and development as a response to Russia's August invasion, while trying to continue to build a grassroots following. Tortladze, Chair of the ACC, explained the commission's progress to date on democratic and social reforms, and its continuing goals. He said progress has been made on political party funding, media freedom, in particular restoring some political talk shows, lowering small business tax liability, and helping return the Writers and Composers Building which was privatized. Tortladze cautioned that the ACC must continue its efforts until the local elections of 2010 in order to ensure democratic reform would take hold. Davitaia serves as chairman of the Parliamentary Commission to investigate the August events. He told Fried that the Commission was focused on investing the question of whether Georgia could have avoided military action, rather than who fired the first shot. Fried encouraged the commission and Davitaia to ask hard questions about Georgian munitions and tactics used in Tskhinvali and South Ossetia. Vepkhvadze noted that he was the first opposition Vice Speaker in Parliament since the Rose Revolution.

¶4. (C) Tortladze also asked Fried if Georgia could pursue a bilateral agreement on defense with the United States, since NATO MAP is extremely unlikely in November. Fried acknowledged the request and said he would review it in Washington.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND NON-PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION

¶5. (C) In a separate meeting, Fried and the Ambassador met with civil society representative and the non-Parliamentary opposition. Attendees included former presidential candidate Levan Gachechiladze, Republican Party Chairman David Usupashvili, Conservative leader Kakha Kukava, Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) Chairman Giorgi Chkheidze, and QLawyers Association (GYLA) Chairman Giorgi Chkheidze, and International Republican Institute (IRI) Chief of Party Dmitry Shashkin. The opposition members claimed they were working for unity in the country. Chkheidze said that democratic reforms were needed, and urged progress on democracy, media freedom, and the rule of law. Shashkin pointed out that the Georgian people wanted dialogue between the government and opposition, and IRI helped create the ACC with this goal. Shashkin noted (supported by fresh polling results reported septel) that Georgians perceived the country was still under threat from Russia, and they were not interested in domestic instability and internal conflict.

¶6. (C) Opposition leaders alleged that Saakashvili had consolidated power via extra-legal means, co-opted the Constitution to serve his interests, and eliminated Parliament's power to serve as a check on the executive branch. Usupashvili believed that the government wanted to weaken Parliament as much as possible, and said the

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government directed all judges and the courts. Fried said that democracy must be strengthened in Georgia and once power was peacefully transferred through constitutional means during normally-scheduled elections, Georgia would be considered fully democratic. Gachechiladze and Kukava argued that they were more effective in opposition outside Parliament (they renounced their seats won in May), as Saakashvili was only afraid of street protests and Russian tanks. The politicians said their parties would not participate in the November Ajara elections for the Supreme Council, a local regional body. (Comment: None of their parties would likely succeed in Ajara, so the boycott is somewhat meaningless. End comment). In a seeming contradiction, they claim new elections remain their ultimate goal. On October 20, Gachechiladze publicly called for a peaceful street rally on November 7 to remember the government's crackdown last year; it remains unclear how many people will turn out.

¶7. (C) Regarding the invasion and current situation, Usupashvili suggested a roadmap of democratic reforms, and urged that incoming foreign aid to Georgia be conditioned up reforms by the government. He asked Fried to keep such stipulations in mind at the Brussels donor conference. Chkheidze agreed that dialogue and maximum transparency were critical to any assistance plan designed to recover from the invasion and develop the country. He noted that the Parliamentary investigatory commission "does not include non-political actors." Finally, Usupashvili said "democratic reforms by the President would be the best answer to Russian aggression," and again asked the U.S. and international community to hold Saakashvili accountable for such reform.

¶8. (C) Fried told both groups that a military solution to Russian occupation did not exist and urged all his interlocutors to support peaceful resolutions to the conflicts, no matter what the timeline. He argued that economic and political development hold the key to Georgia's future. Fried agreed that Georgian democracy needed much in the way of development, and encouraged the opposition to pursue it via constitutional methods.

¶9. (U) Assistant Secretary Fried has cleared this cable.
LOGSDON